

Lesley Laird MP: Maiden speech

Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland Lesley Laird MP

Mr Speaker

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in today's debate.

Before looking forward, I want to take a few moments to pause and reflect on the maiden speeches made by the Members of Parliament that have gone before me representing the constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath.

My predecessor, Roger Mullin, served the constituency from June 2015 to May 2017 and in his maiden speech he quoted Kirkcaldy's famous son, Adam Smith, who said: "that no society can surely be flourishing and happy of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable".

That same line was also used by Dr Lewis Moonie, another predecessor, who served this fine constituency from 1987 till 2005.

So what struck me about this was, that while so much may have changed in our society, the fundamental challenges reflected then – and here today – remain the same.

It would, of course, be remiss of me not to mention Gordon Brown – who served the Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency for 10 years from 2005 and also served this country as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister – a true and sincere public servant for his constituency and this country.

But Dr Brown did in fact make his maiden speech in the then seat of Dunfermline East constituency in 1983.

On that occasion the debate was about Social Security and proposals to reduce the benefit level to be paid – an issue still reflected within today's society.

The constituency that I am honoured and privileged to represent is Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath. I would like to thank the people of this resilient constituency for giving me the opportunity to represent them.

What repeatedly strikes me about my area is that it is full of talent, and as yet, untapped and unfulfilled potential – potential that deserves to be unlocked.

My constituency is an area that has known the highs of industrial prosperity through mining, manufacturing, linoleum and shipping and now the lows of poverty and hardship as these industries have slipped away and never really been replaced.

It is an area that offers so much – in terms of skills and spirit, and remains a hidden gem in terms of the contribution that it could make to our

economy and society.

It has character and resilience – shown so strongly through the towns and villages of our mining communities and beyond. Attributes that have seen it continue to hold its ground – its head high – but it deserves to make better progress.

And so I ask myself what can we all do differently in this House to stop repeating history and that quote and sentiment from Adam Smith?

Are we really saying that the many talents in this House cannot turn the tide for our most deprived communities?

Are we really saying that our political will does not match the spirit and resilience of the communities we represent?

Today, we will be discussing Education and Local Services – two enablers for people in my constituency – and yours – to a better life for themselves and their families.

For the previous five years I have been an elected councillor in Fife, and know first hand the life changing, and life saving services, that are delivered by local authorities.

Yet these life bridging services are being systematically dismantled and eroded, leaving investment in people – in communities and infrastructure – flawed and fragmented.

It was Sir Winston Churchill who expressed concerns for “the harsh excess of accumulated capital” and the “gaping sorrows of the left out millions”.

And so, as we discuss these life changing issues today, I put it to the House – is it therefore not our duty to try something new.

Today we are talking about education – an enabler of change, an opportunity for many to leave poverty behind – but only through adequate funding for local services can that opportunity be delivered.

So, back to the start; the issues discussed by my predecessors in Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath are still the issues we are debating today. Are we accepting of the notion that the poor are always with us – or are we prepared to take a different path – and what could be the harm in that?

Let me leave you with a little story – Fife Council ran a Construction Academy with local businesses and Fife College. One young man seized the opportunity. It was life changing. In more ways than one.

He had been in habit of staying up late – because he had no job to get up for. However, on the first day of work he went to bed at midnight. An early night. By the end of the week he was in his bed at 9pm. His mother was worried about this and came into his room to see if he was ok. Yes, he said – he just wanted a good night’s sleep so that he could do his very best at work the next day. Education – and business working together – but an

opportunity brought to life and enabled by a local authority. Opening up a world of opportunity, respect and dignity.

Let me close today by once again quoting Sir Winston Churchill – “the state must increasingly and earnestly concern itself with the care of the sick, the aged and the young. The state must increasingly assume the position of the reserve employer of Labour.”

For the sake of the people of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and communities across the country, I sincerely hope we all seize this moment to stop repeating the mistakes of history and look to finding new ways to regain a sense of society and opportunity for all.

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